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N O T E S F R O M M O N T A N A

By

Ann Elisabeth Weisman

B.A., University of Tulsa, 1971

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

degree of

Master of Fine Arts

UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA

1974

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A C K K O W L E D G M E N T S

Some of the poems which appear in this collection have been previously published. Acknowledgment is given for the following: "There Will Be No Music Tonight," Nimrod, spring/summer 1973, and "Poem from a Last Lover," Cutbank III.

D E D I C A T I O N

This collection is dedicated to the two men who
taught me to see,

Paul C. Benton

and

Charles J. Katz

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NOTES FROM MONTANA

Notes from Montana

i

Between the flashings of neon
a crow wings black down the valley.
And I wonder
are those trees standing now
in the mist by the ocean?

It is not fear of mountains falling
but mountains as bars on the window.

Once, at Nepenthe, when we stepped onto the terrace,
under the lightness of the hills,
I felt to be hatless
and floating upward into dissipation.
His love held me
thin string
to the ground.

ii

Still the crow shadows the valley.
And I wonder
does the land smell now
in those hills thick with dogwood?

It is not lack of trees on mountains
but hills without southern woods
deep and tangled into near foreboding.

For a day, it was a moist and springing carpet,
river odor of leaves molding earth,
wet and wooded pecans smoldering on rocks.
With night came the wind,
cold off the river,
swift prelude
to the brown-leaved rattle.

iii

A directioned movement breaks the mourning.
A motor snarls like cat.

Between the flashings
the crow's wing is motion suspended:
pecan trees and gulls.

TRAVELING OUT

Six Aspects of the Ark, after Stevens
for Manley and Mary Johnson

i

Through one day
the river is thick
with aged ramblings
when, under the hot sun,
the muds ooze blood.

ii

Before nights in November
when all colors dim,
the river is brilliant
as mica.

iii

When the wind blows
the water looks to flow upstream.
Are not the appearance
and the true flowing
parts of the same river?

iv

The river hills lie,
shore of bellies and breasts
where the loving tongue flows screaming.

v

The sentry trees stand
exposed nerve endings
shocked into dark electricity
by the cold of water.

vi

All through the drowsy day
over the river
the gulls hang
in a balance of wings.

Tulsa Storm: May, 1971
for Richard Hugo

Under bridges, the river
screamed that sudden night
we went to war.

Flew as lightning bombed us,
thunder splintered around us,
when the dead radio
shattered the world.

The river uprooted,
and torn trees
lined the streets
like dead soldiers anywhere.
Flowed past trees,
undone virgins,
dead with green petticoats
around their ears.

Under birds,
the river slid through spring.
Even when mistletoe
lost its hard grip,
rabbits turned in river mist,
knowing fish spittle and sudden smoke.

Two Days into the Sinai
for Madeline DeFrees

i

Three hours from the mountain
a bus is stuck in sand.
A tractor filled with flowing bedouins
comes in for a rescue.
Before we are saved,
a cry comes from the east.

ii

We picnic in the oasis Firan,
date palms spread for several city blocks.
The children beg.
We give of our food.
Beneath a tree,
legs drip down the stone wall,
backs turn on that roofless house
filled with hard mounds of sand.

iii

Limestone and granite change as the sun moves.
You could say it is jagged rock
tempered by wind and flood.

Or is it that through the thick silence,
in your innermost ear,
you hear Mescalito bouncing off the walls?

iv

This night, we sleep at the foot of the Mountain.
After dinner, the smooth-skinned bedouin,
with his five strings and oil can,
sings the soft, sad wind for me.
The others crouch behind the kitchen door,
listening.

At nine, the lights go out.
In our cots, we hear the generator halt.
Suddenly, the wind moans black in crevices
and then, a cat's blood screaming.
We sleep in the cold night like children,
our heads under blankets.

v

At four, we rise to begin our ascent.
Bedouins bring only one camel.
We all walk.

I stay alone
while the others mount to the summit,
try to watch the signs,

wait for enlightenment.
I huddle in a crevice
to escape the wind.
And though the bird
flies before me three times,
I think only of the men I've met.

vi

But now, we are waiting for the bus,
a small circle of smoke and talk.
It must be a bird or a wolf, a coyote.
For a moment, we are solid--
our backs, fragile and shivering,
hearts, somehow too human.
We look at the sky,
speckless and blue.
All horizons, silent granite.

Zurich: a Waltz

Ahniwake dragging in mist through the morning
burdened old man
with French poodle trotting, radio blaring,
all rolled in a limping.

Ahniwake sitting on bench in the morning
outside the land house
throwing out bread crumbs, coaxing the sparrows
while flapping at pigeons.

Two mallards and mates in the park in the morning
with three flying off and one mate remaining,
one mallard returning
and Ahniwake holding the dog like a lover.

Ahniwake inside my eye in the morning
one of those moments
of Viennese waltzing, one of those moments
of black poodle holding,
one of those moments of eyes sucking out
and lids inward turning.

TRAVELING IN

"Life was a blue well, his soul a honeybee
that flicked the water slowly with its wings, and drank."
N. Kazantzakis

In the Sinai

Ahniwake rose before the sun.
In the hush of grey sand
she flowed to the mountain,
climbed with the sun to the summit.
She saw a tree in a valley,
a lizard clawing a Sioux's candle face.
Bedouins crying inside stone.
She felt the cold breath of the mountain
shape rough rock until it flowed
smooth as water on grass.
Picking a crevice that was no shield,
she waited for god
and the god never came.

In her house

Ahniwake slid into her bed,
her house became a well.
She opened her mouth
and the water rushed out
leaving her filled with a light
that halved her, etched her in blue.

God drank of the water
and spoke with the hands of a lover.

She woke
with her eyes in a garden.
A man far above her
smiled. She looked up
at the woman smiling.
She breathed of the unicorn smiling.
One clear song,
and her smile shattered the apple.

There Will Be No Music Tonight
for Thomas Enman

There will be no music tonight.

I am dying.

It is always this way when I die,
watching the particles, blue with energy,
file out of my left breast,
knowing I am dying
because my life is caught again,
turning inward,
coiling and recoiling
in the thundering silence.

Will my life go like trees in early autumn?
The drift and the dream,
soft fade and fall,
singular yielding up of gentle spirit?
Or will it go like leavings of November,
explosion of color,
molecules of the closed system
flying madly into air,
sticky chlorophyl undone?

Tonight my life will go
as a train leaving the town.
A sharp blast at the crossroads
settling into an even space,
moving steadily up the valley
as the wheel-sound rolls:
water flowing over one step,
then two,
then lifted into the silent stream.

Shall I say I have seen
cane-tripping grey men
moling their way along sidewalks in summer suns,
feeling with my eyes the air aching around them?
That when the yardmen smile,
wrinkled and brown,
not stepping in the house for a glass of water,
I have always felt the need to apologize?

Shall I tell you of the nights,
beggars at my doors, broken
for love, for touch,
and how I took them in for the healing,
failing, so often, when they could not care?

I have seen the world
through a curtain of buzzing molecules.
My body, often lavender,
except for the leftward slash,
burning turquoise
from breast through forehead.

Now I sit here and watch that awful blue
march outward in baroque design,
caught up in the circle of music
I will not hear tonight
because I am dying,
because I hear a train
dimly approaching town.

for Fun--to Carol, with love

It was like this.

We were all in this poetry reading
that was supposed to be for fun
but we were all so scarred
we had to get drunk before we could read.
And even though the building was still standing
after I read my dirty poems
it didn't come through the mirror
until we were driving home
and her little voice floated forward
saying I wish I could write sexy poems.

IN MEMORY OF

They Started Painting Our House Today

Now they are gone,
and we feel lost in this house
where furniture is piled in one room,
thick with sandpapered dust
that once covered the walls,
even where the dog chewed the wallpaper.
The scars are gone:
anger and eyeliner on the bathroom wall,
the stain of a new year's party.
Now the walls are naked plasterboard,
glaring too harsh at dusk.
And we feel lost
in this house we used to know.

Of Harry and Sadie Weisman
for my father

i

This much I know:

the name is my grandmother's.

The Russian draft-dodger hid

under it to get in. It remains with me

that they settled in South Dakota,

sold shoes to Sitting Bull's nephew,

fed boxcar men through the depression.

Retiring to white adobe,

they breathed roses,

hot sand and oranges. This

is what remains--

the taste of tea and cookies at four,

the cuckoo clock in their blue kitchen,

gnarled hands tracing my shy smiles.

Old, loving strangers are etched on my brain

and all that remains are other stories,

lacking their voice.

I remember one morning,
we lined milk bottles on the porch.
The desert air
moist with their sweet odor.
Now and then it happens,
a vague scent grabs my nose.
I turn,
drunk on the brink,
begging to relive the first breathing.

In Memory of Louis Blend
for my mother

i

I went to the back of the store.
Past the corned-beef and bread.
Under the hours of king-of-the-mountain
on piled flour bags.
Beyond the bins and mixers
(I saw him, arms
sunk to the elbows in dough)
I went behind the oven
to sit on a discarded box.

ii

"The end of an era," my mother said.
And we accepted
those hard symbols:
no cookies since October,
no brownies that winter,
the recipes lost in his dusty brain.
The bakery went for twenty thousand.

iii

Once he came to me
wearing a grey flannel suit.
As he opened his mouth,
I spoke. He vanished.
Now I go creeping under grass,
slithering toward stone,
trying to remember
that the baker,
who was a hero,
was my grandfather
is dead.

In Memory, Jack Hermanstorfer

He stands in my doorway
facing trees and water.
His song settles on him
and he is grey in its dust.
I look up,
see him fragile.
His unvoiced dancing
rattles in my ear
as I see the sun
splinter around him.

MY BODY

Autumn on the Arkansas
for Sandy Courter

i

My body, an earth,
flows with hills and valleys,
a river fertile with red mud.
To be a man
enfolded in this softness,
the utter, unutterable softness.

ii

Today, for the first time,
I saw through the brain of the shimmering tree.
Behind the movement
and beyond the cold water,
the hills lay dark and veiled,
huge and sleeping bodies.

Above, the gulls flowed,
slowly eased the spiral
of wings flashing,
slowly smoothed the air
like a man's hand
descending into the instant
before he touches the woman's body.

My Body

I dress in grey
and stand like trees,
too soon uncovered,
pink
beneath satins and feathers.

My Breasts

i

My breasts are unlovely.
They belong
to the jungle.

The man
who said they are beautiful
should knock
at the door of my warm house,
enter,
and slip
his cold hands
under my flowing shirt.

ii

In the past
I would not shower.
His infrequent odor
clung to me for days.

Today, I sat for a moment
feeling your smell

still warm

wrap itself around me.

Then I bathed.

I'm not sorry: your scent
still threading my sheets.

THE GYPSY LOVER

Song of the Happily Married Woman

I had my gypsy lover
that day when he had me,
down along the river
beneath the flashing tree.

And like the tree he flashed
his hair, his darker eyes.
He was so bold and handsome,
his fingers were so wise.

He poured himself like honey
upon my numb body,
and his fire turned me golden
like the flashings of the sun.

And when I reached to touch him,
to pull him to my side,
my arms encircled emptiness.
The woman in me cried.

It seems that gypsy lovers
can never stay to love,
and those of us who love them
must learn new ways to live.

Pass the tree, my gypsy lover,
move slow and never kneel.
Burn my heart, my gypsy lover,
or I may begin to feel

far too much for you, my gypsy,
too much for us to bear.
Neither I nor you, my gypsy,
nor my loving husband dear.

"If you sit on the left, you can watch the pianist's hands."

I sit on the left.

I watch the pianist's hands.

They can be as willow branches,

those hands,

or thunder,

but they are never without purpose

when they stretch out

rippled chords to solitary notes.

Watching, the music weaves my ears

and with careful intent,

draws down the awakening languid ache.

I sit on the right.

The pianist's hands find me.

They move like silk,

these hands,

or fire,

but they always know their purpose

as they burn the edges of my face,

ease the hollows of my body.

Rising, I hear him,

and he, hair flaming,

gathers me hugely in a crush of green leaves.

To a Ghostly Lover

The cat sleeps, his head
on the crevice of my ass.
I need no more
to draw your image to me.
Remember Oklahoma heat,
the press of your skin.
You stand, kore, before me:
hair curls the fire consuming your face,
the muscles of your belly
carve gulls' wings in a high wind.

Now they say I should leave you,
pluck you, foetal, from my brain.
I have no will to do so.
You crowd this haunted room
and these years of long desire
die slow in dream,
curl in the tangle of our tongues.

Aftermath
for Joanne Pinaire

Let the darkness bring its image
of the man who is
your own despair.
Pale lady, you cannot hide,
let his demon,
his soft touch,
unfurl beneath moiling faces of moon.
Let the blood run sour
from spaces in your eyes,
and the moon must turn
to echo the gape of your wound.

Counting Song

Twenty-one, twenty-one,
shall we play it just for fun?
What the prize that's to be won,
what the game, you twenty-one?

Twenty-two, twenty-two,
here I have an old black shoe
and as she said you will not do.
I will not do it, twenty-two.

Twenty-three, twenty-three,
goats and camels can't catch me
for I can hide and I can flee
though the men be twenty-three.

Twenty-four, twenty-four,
I could open many a door
but would you ask for more and more?
And I could die at twenty-four.

Twenty-five, twenty-five,
the bees are busy by the hive,
they say its good to be alive
and I've known angels twenty-five.

Twenty-six, twenty-six,
dare you ford the river Styx?
I've built my house of grass and bricks
and I've had demons twenty-six.

Twenty-seven, twenty-seven,
would you go and cross to heaven?
Though the lines become uneven
there's the road marked twenty-seven.

Twenty-eight, twenty-eight,
here's a rhyme for us to hate.
Or else you try the words too late.
Oh what to do with twenty-eight.

Twenty-nine, twenty-nine,
well, old fork, how's your tine?
You should say you're feeling fine
for you broke spoons twenty-nine.

Thirty-one, thirty-one,
skip the death that was begun,
then take your aim and point your gun.
Now let space end with thirty-one.

Poem from a Last Lover

We were kissing
long entwined
when I wanted out.
As I moved to draw back my tongue,
he refused.
I pulled harder,
he clenched harder,
until, far back,
he bit down hard.

And I bled.
Red flowing like a flood
from the gash in my mouth.
Red
gasping in my eyes,
sputtering in my nose,
one day when my gypsy lover
bit off my tongue.